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## On second thought, hold the bombs

### Under political fire, Corps makes apology for danger zone confusion

 By DON BEHM, JESSICA MCBRIDE and LAWRENCE SUSSMAN  
 of the Journal Sentinel staff

*Last Updated: April 25, 2002*

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued an apology Thursday after a day of pointed criticism from state and federal officials over vaguely described plans to reinstate a National Guard "live fire exercise area" in Lake Michigan.

The Corps, which said it was only trying to restore to nautical charts a long-standing military danger zone in Lake Michigan, said Thursday that there would be no dropping of bombs or firing of missiles by Wisconsin Air National Guard planes in that space.

And commercial anglers and other boaters would be rarely inconvenienced, officials said.

#### 'Danger zone'

#### How To Comment

☐ The public comment period on the danger zone designation has been extended to May 15.

☐ For information, or to submit a comment, call Howard Ecklund at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' permit office in Waukesha

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The danger zone, which begins only a few miles offshore and extends from Port Washington to Manitowoc, simply identifies an Air National Guard training area, the Corps of Engineers assured in a statement.

That clarification came Thursday evening after a full day of fact-finding by the Corps' St. Paul, Minn., regional office and too late to deflect harsh criticism from elected officials.

U.S. Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (R-Wis.) said Thursday that he was "absolutely outraged" by the lack of information.

And U.S. Rep. Mark Green (R-Green Bay) called the situation "very disturbing" and "bizarre."

The request to print the danger zone on Lake Michigan nautical maps came directly from Volk Field, a Wisconsin Air National Guard base near New Lisbon in Juneau County, said Frank Torbett, a program analyst with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Washington, D.C.

Master Sgt. Bill Milem at Volk Field was even pressing the Corps to publish the danger zone notice in the Federal Register earlier this year, Torbett said.

Milem was said to be on vacation the remainder of the week and unavailable for comment.

Sensenbrenner and U.S. Rep. Tom Petri (R-Wis.) are scheduled to meet in Washington next week with Major General James G. Blaney, adjutant general of the Wisconsin National Guard and Air National Guard.

"I'm sure that Congressman Petri and I will have the welcoming

at (262) 547-4171.

Comments also can be forwarded to Frank Torbett, of the Corps of Engineers' headquarters regulatory branch in Washington, D.C., by calling (202) 761-4618.

#### Quotable

“ I view this as a breach of faith in going behind the backs of Wisconsin officials. ”

- Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis.

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committee out there for him," Sensenbrenner said.

Blaney has been working behind the scenes to locate Blackhawk helicopters at the West Bend Airport, Sensenbrenner said, "and if there is a way to get everybody in eastern Wisconsin opposed to them, that's what this is."

Sensenbrenner said Blaney "isn't bashful in letting us know what he wants. But I view this as a breach of faith in going behind the backs of Wisconsin officials."

Among the officials doing some serious damage control Thursday was Lt. Col Tim Donovan, a public affairs officer for the Wisconsin National Guard. He said the Guard had no intention of dropping objects, other than flares, from its aircraft in the future.

"It is occasionally used for military training, including air combat tactics and supersonic flights by fighter aircraft," Donovan said. "Military aircraft have not released ordnance in this zone in more than 10 years," Donovan said.

In its Thursday statement, the Corps of Engineers attempted to clarify the impact of such a danger zone designation on commercial fishing trawlers, charter boats and recreational boaters.

Though a notice published March 11 in the Federal Register said that no boats could anchor or drift "at any time" in the zone, the Corps explained that boating restrictions would be in place only when military aircraft were flying over the area.

"The restrictions apply only when the danger zone is activated," said Shannon Bauer, a spokeswoman for the Corps of Engineers' St. Paul, Minn., office.

Because the notice did not say that directly, representatives of commercial fishing boats and recreational fishing clubs had opposed the danger zone designation.

Confusion was escalated by comments from Maj. Brendan Smith of

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the Air National Guard in Thursday's Ozaukee Press, a weekly newspaper in Port Washington, in which he described special operations by Blackhawk helicopters shooting at floating targets "or special-ops guys" firing M-16s.

"If we have helicopters doing gunnery exercises, an M-60 has a ricochet danger area of about five miles, so we wouldn't need to restrict an area much larger than that," Smith was quoted as saying. "But if we have F-16s doing bombing, then we'd probably restrict the entire area."

In regards to Smith's comments, Petri said:

"We didn't even know they wanted a redesignation of the area, but Blackhawk helicopters and special things ricocheting? It sounds like someone's going to a movie."

Petri said he doubted there were any serious plans to do practice bombing in the lake, adding that the National Guard "seemed at the highest levels unaware of it, it's not something high on their agenda."

Donovan, who learned about Smith's comments from a reporter, speculated that he was speaking about hypothetical situations. "That is not what the Wisconsin Air National Guard has in mind."

The furor also had the attention of Gov. Scott McCallum.

"We have been - the state of Wisconsin has been - in contact with the Army Corps of Engineers throughout the day," said Tim Roby, the governor's spokesman.

"We have voiced our strong displeasure with this process, and the governor is very concerned about the effects and impact on commercial fishing, recreational boating and general public safety, so we will be forwarding our concerns onto the Corps in a formal letter."

Roby said McCallum was unavailable to comment directly because he was at an event in Madison.

Howard Ecklund, project manager for permits with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Waukesha, will discuss the danger zone at a meeting Saturday of the Wisconsin Federation of Great Lakes Sport Fishing Clubs.

While the meeting is open to the public, no one other than club members will be allowed to speak or ask questions, said club President Louie Kowieski.

The meeting will be held at 9 a.m. at the Sheboygan Outboard Club, 732 N. Water St. in Sheboygan.

*Dan Benson of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.*

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